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ABSTRACT

On the premise that the kind of writing done in business and technical writing classes is a social act, the business and technical writing courses at Auburn University (Alabama) use peer interaction, revision, and audience awareness to help students become aware of and internalize the conventions of writing. Students are required to read each others' writing and write about it, then revise their own work. Students exchange their memoranda, technical instruction, and letters of application and resumes, then write memos to the instructor evaluating their peer's work. More effectively than textbook models, this strategy allows students to see work that is different from their own, and realize the broader range of choices. Revision is implemented as students rewrite and resubmit their letters and resumes, using the in-class memos, comments from teacher-student conferences, and their experiences of reading other students' work. The peer interaction deemphasizes the visual aspects of writing by creating a social context and a sense of the reader or audience. (HTH)

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Reading in the Writing Class: Conventions, Socialization, and Revision

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My purpose in this presentation is to describe for you certain classroom strategies that I have found useful in my business and technical writing classes. These strategies aim at increasing the students' writing abilities by making the students experience a wider range of rhetorical options for any given writing situation. My intention is to help students internalize various writing behaviors by reading, writing, and revising in order to increase the flexibility they bring to bear upon particular writing tasks.

What I want to do here is describe a small part of what I do in the classroom and then point to the directions that a theoretical discussion of these techniques would take. My basic premise here is that writing--at least the kind of writing done in business and technical writing classes--is a social act. It occurs within a community of writers and readers, a community that establishes the bounds and conventions of discourse. Students have only limited notions about these bounds and conventions; I try to expand their views.

What follows then is a description of problems students demonstrate in their writing, a description of what I do in the classroom, and a discussion of some of the theoretical implications in terms of the rhetorical context.

First, though, a small explanation. I am afraid that my title may be

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slightly misleading. By "reading in the writing class" I do not mean the traditional practice of having students read models of good writing in a particular type or style followed by classroom discussion and then the attempt by the students to produce on their own texts in the manner of the model. This traditional approach to composition is still found in many college classrooms, an approach anticipated and expected by the majority of students I have encountered, and a strategy at least implicit in every writing textbook I have examined. Even the new wave of process-oriented textbooks falls into the trap of providing models whenever they print an example. The example is usually a good one, and by virtue of its being cited as such by the textbook author it immediately assumes the status of a model in the mind of the student. However good the example may be as an example, it invariably falls short as a model. No model can serve for all situations, although that is exactly what I see students attempt to use it for.

The problem is that the students adopt or steal the surface features of a model, even the exact wording, missing the deep structure that is the valuable part of a model. As we all know, the rhetorical situation of even the simplest tasks—say, a straightforward good news letter or a set of instructions—is too complex for a single abstract description or single example to cover all individual cases. The aim is to lead the students to distinguish between the deep underlying structure and the surface features of tone, style, and vocabulary. Take for example the good news letter. Writing to tell someone that she has just won $10 million dollars from Ed McMahon or that she has just been accepted into college would require the same deep structure--what some textbooks call the direct approach--but both of these announcements would not be presented or worded in the same way. They are from different categories of

experience. Students, unfortunately, read the model and cast their announcements of good news in the same phrasing, glossing over the fine distinctions and subtleties of the particular rhetorical context.

The problem, then, is to break down the perceived authority of the model in the students' eyes and return it to the status of an example, or at least to increase the students' flexibility in their use of models and examples. Part of my intention in a writing class is to increase the students' awareness of the complexity of writing and of the possible choices open to them for proceeding in different ways as determined by the situation and context. The eventual goal of the course is to prepare the student for the writing tasks for which she has seen no textbook example. One way to work toward this goal goes through the three stages of my subtitle: conventions, socialization, and revision.

Both writing and reading are conventional acts in the sense that both are governed by conventions—rules, norms, customs, even laws. One mark of the educated, literate person is the ability to manipulate these conventions correctly. A violation of a convention must be willful and conscious; for example, a sentence fragment can on occasion be effective and welcome. (The violation of convention is a staple literary device.) The reverse proposition is equally true: one mark of an uneducated, illiterate person is the inability to purposefully manipulate the conventions.

When I first taught basic writing (at a university with open admissions) I was shocked to see the students commit such stupid and idiotic errors as place terminal punctuation against the left hand margin. As for the content of what they wrote, it was vacuous and insipid. It was trite, vague, boring, confusing, and often meaningless. How dumb, I thought. I was wrong, of

course. The problem with the basic writing students was the same as I see every quarter now when the senior-level business student begins a formal letter to a stranger with "Dear Ms. Smith," followed by a comma instead of a colon or when a senior-level engineer begins a formal sentence definition with "strain is a term used by engineers to" or "a CPU is a device." Although in each of these cases I am noting only superficial problems, they are symptomatic of deeper, more complex processes. What these students lack is an awareness of the conventions that govern written discourse, not just the conventions of grammar and punctuation but also the conventions governing levels of diction, style, and everything else. In short, they are deficient in the norms of written behavior. They have probably seen the conventions at work and have more than likely been told what the conventions are (this is our job as teachers), but they have not mastered and internalized these procedures. They don't feel their force as conventions. To return to the basic writing students, they were producing what they thought writing consisted of. Although on a much more sophisticated level, my students today are doing the same thing.

Rather than just deluge the students with more examples, my method is to make the students do something. I make them read each others' writing and then write about it. In the end, I lead them on to revising their own work. The aim is to help them internalize the conventions of written discourse, not so much that they learn the rule of putting a colon after Dear Ms. Smith but that putting the colon there becomes an automatic or felt behavior in the appropriate circumstance.

Let me explain three of the strategies I use. They are adaptable to different assignments and situations, and I use a number of variations of these three. However, they illustrate the kind of thing I do and how others may

apply it. I will go into greater detail with the first activity in order show the features in common.

1. Early in the quarter, usually with the first writing assignment, I give the students a few minutes to proofread their letters or memos, even though they may be more them ready to hand them in as is. To help the students, I explain different proofreading techniques. Although their assignments are typed and I have previously stressed appearance and such, I tell them that they can make corrections right on the page. When the students look finished, I have them exchange their letters or memos with each other: they are to read the other person's work and then write a memo to me evaluating that work. Specifically, they are asked to comment on whether the purpose is clearly stated and whether there are any problems or errors or mistakes of any kind.

The students' first response is to groan; they had thought they were done with the assignment. One thing for the students to learn is that no matter how many times they may think they are done with a piece of writing it is rare that they will ever be finished with it. Even a short, simple letter is not finished, but, to use Valery's term, it is "abandoned."

The second response to this assignment comes when someone realizes, from looking at another's work, that he has forgotten to sign his letter or to initial his memo. There then comes a flutter of re-exchanged papers as others realize the same lapse. Usually, someone asks what is so important about signing or initialing, and I explain. My sense is that my explanation does little good; I have given it once already. Instead, what matters here is the action and seeing what others have done. My belief is that from this point of the quarter on any failure to sign or initial is genuine carelessness, while

this first time was the result of ignorance.

Eventually, though, the students settle down to 15 minutes of reading and writing. During this time, some of them see work that is better than their own, and others see work which is not as effective as their own. The point is that they see work **different** from their own. What I hope to accomplish with this activity is for the students to see that they have a broader range of choices for proceeding than they had imagined beforehand, that there are different ways to go that are potentially possible for them to achieve on their own.

As I explain to the students, one purpose of this activity is to increase their own effectiveness as critics of others' writing. However, for now I have them address their criticisms to me; several are always so harsh or blunt--or even wrong--that their comments might devastate the original writers. (We do discuss during the quarter how to point out problems or mistakes to writers in a tactful and constructive manner and tone; on the job, many of these students will be writing in groups or cooperating with others who are writing.) Additionally, I tell the students that one aim of the course is to make them such effective critics of their own writing that they will no longer need me. We joke about putting English teachers out of business; the students, I must admit, are enormously attracted to this idea.

What is remarkable about this assignment is that many of the students make quite perceptive comments, pointing out not just errors but also problems in style, tone, or content. Some of the better students can adeptly point out what is good in a document. Other students rather routinely label features as good or bad. The weakest students demonstrate a genuine inability to distinguish between good and bad writing, often castigating the original writers for

committing serious flaws--flaws which somehow escape my own notice. In certain cases the in-class memos are more indicative of the students' own writing problems than those of the documents they are criticizing (or of problems they have previously been accused of). Whatever the result, though, of the in-class memos does not matter. What matters is that the students read other possibilities.

(I should note here that these in-class memos have no need to be graded; I give them only checks and comment on only especially fine or especially misguided statements. I would contend that this exercise would be of value to the students even if you never read the in-class memos. The purpose is not to generate yet another grade.)

2. The same procedure applies when the students write sets of instructions. When they exchange their instructions, this time they are to write me a memo explaining if the instructions are workable--can the reader follow the instructions and perform the task herself. If not, why not. A set of instructions is meant to be used; if it can't be, it is worthless. What the students need to look for here is how well the instructions suit the intended reader and what the writer does to accommodate that person.

3. Another assignment for my students is to write a letter of application for a job and a resume (most of my students are close to graduation and are highly motivated toward doing well with this assignment). On the day they are due, I have the students exchange the letters and resumes until they have read 6 or 7 of them; then they write a memo explaining what they could have done differently with their own. They are to take what they have seen in the work of the others and apply what they can of it to their own. Most have constructive comments for themselves.

In my business writing classes, we spend a great deal of time on the letter of application and resume. After the students write the letters and resumes, write the in-class memos, and have me grade them, they are to revise them and resubmit them on a specified date at the end of the quarter. Before this due date, I hold individual conferences with each student to discuss her writing and this assignment in particular, and students are encouraged to turn in drafts at any time for further comments. In other words, with this assignment I institutionalize revision. And when the students sit down to revise, they have my written and oral comments, my answers to their questions, their in-class memos, and the examples in the textbook, on my handouts, and from their experience of reading their fellow students'. My intention is to provide the student with a varied knowledge base--a data base, if you will--of different ways of approaching the rhetorical problems of finding a job. Everyone has different problems to account for or lessen, such as a low grade point average, a lack of job experience, no outside activities, a ten-year undergraduate career, a super-abundance of Greek activities, and so on. While the purpose of the in-class activities is to acquaint students with the conventions and options available to them, the purpose of revision is to internalize these strategies by working them through, discarding some and retaining others.

This process of internalization constitutes the socialization of my subtitle. Just as we all learn the codes and demands of social behavior--everything from learning when it is appropriate to curse to knowing which fork to use at the dinner table--so must we learn the codes and demands of written discourse. We cannot just study the rules of writing. The study of grammar in and of itself will never improve writing. Instead, the strategies I present here aim to enlarge the rhetorical context for the student and to develop a

broader range of choices. By writing, reading, and writing about writing, the student should make the conventions of discourse and their possibilities become a part of herself and her writing repertoire.

Beyond institutionalizing revision in the letter of application and resume assignment, I include it as a regular feature of my classes. On any assignment that the student makes less than a certain grade, he has the option of rewriting it and resubmitting it. Often I suggest to a student that a particular assignment be revised. Just because of the numbers involved, I cannot allow all students to revise all their writings. Ideally, I wish I could. Instead, this option is for the weaker students who need the work and those who have trouble with a particular assignment. With these students, though, it is important for them to learn that revision is not the mere correction of the problems I have marked. Revision is reseeing, of looking at another way to go.

So much for the classroom practice; as you have heard, nothing here by itself is particularly special. Now, however, I would like to stake out a little theoretical groundwork.

One problem I am attempting to cope with by way of these classroom activities is the familiar one of failing to take account of the audience. It is easy enough for us to drone on to the student that he should be more aware of his reader or that he should take time to analyze his audience, but despite our wisdom the advice is futile. Probably the single most serious problem of weak writers is that they write to themselves. Part of what I do in the class then is to give the students readers--sitting right beside them is a potential audience of readers. At the very least, the student can watch a person read her words.

The problem with writing as an activity is that it takes place in isola-

tion, even when composing in a room full of people. Students forget about the audience of their writing, creating a vacuum for themselves to work in, because in fact there is no real audience for writing. No one hears writing, except when it is read aloud, an unusual circumstance. Writing as a mode of communication contains the aural but only in potential. The nature of writing as a communications mode is inherently visual. Furthermore, reading writing encourages a visual approach to the world, devaluing the aural. Before ending here, I want to make a few comments on how the visual nature of writing contributes to the lack of audience awareness in weaker writers. This nature of writing breeds the isolation of the writer.

First, it is important to emphasize the central place the visual has for us. Vision is a compelling metaphor. I have drawn on it often in this presentation myself. Of all our senses, we grant more authority to sight. We say, "I see the light." Most of us everyday humans see the truth; only mystics and schizophrenics hear it. We trust our sight more than the other senses, even those of us myopic and color-blind. We know that the eye can be tricked, for example by the sleight of hand of the magician or by the shadows of Plato's cave. However, the force of both examples is only reinforced by the eye. The magician's effect depends upon the fact that we saw him do what he didn't let us see. Plato's shadows are overcome by the genuine light outside the cave that can be perceived only through the eyes in unmediated vision. Finally, so much of individual reality is determined by the fact that "I saw it myself."

I could continue to pile up examples and trace various implications, but that would be to stray too far beyond my bounds (if I have not done so already). However, I do want to note that writing itself privileges the visual. A text is primarily meant to be seen, not heard. Literate societies

tend to lose listening and memory skills because writing frees us from their burdens--a text can be consulted in the way a memory cannot. Writing allows us to communicate despite our physical absence by presenting the reader with something to see. In the face of this dominance and prestige of the visual in our valuing system, I would maintain however that the act of writing--the process of writing--is non-visual. Or at least avisual. I don't look at anything when writing except the page or VDT just to check that my hands are doing as they should. But I don't need to do even this; I can turn off my screen and continue typing. I would still be writing. Thus, to describe writing in visual terms alone is only an attempt to catch writing in metaphor. This metaphor, though, is inescapable, and to some extent it has shaped the way humans have thought since writing's invention, although this shift in thought only began to become widespread with the introduction of printed texts and mass literacy. The implications are far beyond my scope here, but writing has changed the way we see the world (as I said, the metaphor is inescapable).

This stress on the visual is apparent in students. Because they are alone when they write, creating a visual display on the page, students lose focus on the situation in which they write, that someone will read their words and respond to them. So much student writing (and bad writing everywhere) exists in a void where no response is even imagined. In business and technical writing classes, because of the practicality of the assignments, it is easier to generate the notion of a response from the reader or that the reader might take action based on what the student has written (for example, hire her for a job). The void is replaced by the context of a situation, the dynamics of dialogue instead of monologue. To shift vocabulary, the student moves from producing inner speech directed only at himself to outer speech directed at

others, from producing writer-based prose to reader-based prose.

As I stated in the beginning, writing is a social act occurring within a community of writers and readers. Writing takes meaning because it exists within an interpretative community which provides meanings. The classroom activities I have described aim at bringing the student into the community by forcing her to see that there is a reader out there who will react to her writing and that she has a variety of strategies available to her depending on the situation and context. Students want to know the one way to write something; I try to break that habit and increase their writing repertoires.